

Roland HPD-15
HANDSONIC

VOLUME
LEVEL
SWEEP
LFO RATE
PITCH
COLOR
LFO PITCH
PAN
MFX LEVEL
LFO FLT/AMP
REALTIME MODIFY

RIBBON CONTROL
HOLD
SOUND
L

D BEAM CONTROLLER

USER/PRESET GROUP
P01 LATIN
01 CONGA

WRITE
COPY
PARAMETER
SKIP
EXIT
MODIFY
CLEAR

PAD SET
A
B
C
PITCH/VALUE

POWER
GROUP
AFRICAN
INDIAN
LATIN
ORIENTAL
MEXICAN
DANCE
BPM
LOOPS
PATCH NUMBER
PRESET
CHAIN
SEQUENCER
TEMPO
REC
PLAY/STOP
D BEAM
CONTROL
MULTI-EFFECTS
RIBBON CONTROL
SOUND
HOLD
R

ROLAND ELECTRONIC PERCUSSION SUMMIT

Five of the world's finest drummers – Bashiri Johnson, Brad Dutz, Luis Conte, Richie Garcia and Taku Hirano – reveal the impact Roland has had on the way they perform and record music. Words: Steve Fisher and Greg Rule

How have things changed for working percussionists over the past few years?

Brad: On the studio side, there are fewer large orchestras and more visits to home studios. It's more personalized. As I'm not going to the big studios so much anymore, or there might not be much room, I use the HandSonic a lot. I can use it to cover, for example, the four udu drums that I didn't have with me because the cartage case wouldn't fit into the guy's living room.

Richie: People don't want you to bring 18 cases of stuff, so having the

HandSonic gives you access to some of the things that you aren't always able to bring. As the balance continues to shift toward home studio production, and as more do-it-yourself composers are programming the drum and percussion tracks themselves or using loops, a 'live played' overdub from an instrument such as HandSonic can make a big difference.

Luis: Definitely. People might not ask me to play a lot of stuff because they've already got a lot of it sampled, so I'll add a few things to make the track sound more alive.

Bashiri: There's been a serious

revolution in the way records are produced. One thing I've noticed is that when I get hired, it's unusual now to be playing in a group situation. For about 95 per cent of the time it's just me in the room with the producer and a digital recording rig. What that means is that you have time to focus on just the percussion, and what you can bring to a track.

What types of sounds do you get most often get asked to play on the HandSonic?

Richie: Usually people will ask you to play whatever you think will go with the track. They won't say, "I want Tin Drum #5" – they want your creative and rhythmic input. Maybe I'll just go through the sounds until they hear something they like, and then I'll play whatever I feel will work rhythmically with it.

Luis: Or maybe they have a tabla thing already programmed in their track, but they want you to replace it so it feels human. So you grab a real tabla, but maybe the pitch is the problem. It doesn't quite match the track. That's when you get the HandSonic and tweak the pitch anyway they want it right there on the spot. Even woodblocks or whatever can be tuned to make the track sound good.

Bashiri, you've been using the SPD-20 extensively. What types of sounds do you find yourself playing the most from it?

Bashiri: There are some shows where I'll only have an SPD-20, so I'll have to use all the sounds in it – I'll tweak them to fit the situation. With Whitney [Houston], the SPD sounds I use most often are the claps, finger snaps, shakers, tambourines, chimes, triangles, timpani – the typical sounds that you hear from a percussionist. The electronics give us the freedom to do things with our hands and feet and play certain things that we wouldn't be able to if we were just using two hands on acoustic instruments.

What electronic gear do you use in your studio and live rigs at the moment?

Richie: Just the HandSonic. I don't need anything else.

Brad: Me too.

Luis: Me three.

Brad: There are 600 sounds on there, plus you can alter the patches. I have a little quartet that's just guitar, bass, vocals, and HandSonic. At home, it sits right next to my computer; I've sold my samplers, because with the HandSonic my library is big enough. The main advantages of the HandSonic are having a lot more sounds at my fingertips live plus if something is forgotten at a recording session, it's right there.

Richie: I use mine as an extension of my percussion setup. I put it up high by my congas so I can play it as if it were another conga, or if I need another sound, a clap or whatever, it's right there. I'll use a pedal with it as well, either for a bass drum sound, snaps, claps, cowbell, etc. It's the icing on the cake; it gives me all of the stuff that I normally couldn't carry or reproduce other than electronically.

Brad: I subbed with Hiroshima once, and I needed udus, tablas, and tuned gongs. That's the kind of stuff that you can never get right unless you're travelling with a soundman who really gets it. It's not always practical

to take 12 tuned gongs with you on the road and they'll never be able to mic it right anyway on a live gig, and they don't travel well. With the HandSonic, you can have 12 tuned gongs or six udus and five tablas, which is really great.

Luis: I always used to be an acoustic guy, but that's changed over the years. Now, I have the HandSonic with me all the time; I use the tabla patch a lot. I can take a real tabla and get a sound out of it, but I can take the HandSonic and get something that sounds decent using a hand or finger technique that I'm comfortable with.

Taku: For the Fleetwood Mac tour I'm using two SPD-20s, six 2-zone PD-7 pads, and two pedals. The electronics are completely intermingled with what I'm playing. A lot of the time, I'll be playing traditional acoustic percussion sounds from the pads because I can't physically get to the real instruments at that moment in the song. I might trigger a wind chime run with a footpedal while I'm doing a suspended cymbal roll with one hand and playing a shaker with the other hand. In the studio, the biggest advantage is being able to tweak sounds and get them exactly where I need them to be.

Bashiri: I wouldn't want to do a show without my SPD-20 and at least a couple of pads. I'd feel like there was something missing from what I had to offer if I didn't have them. On the Whitney tour, there are some songs that are fully electronic except for simple cymbal swells or chimes, so in that instance I'll have my hands and feet covering whatever the pattern was on the record.

So is it safe to say the SPD-20s are staples of your live rigs?

Bashiri: Absolutely.

Taku: Me too – it's on my rider. If it's a rental gig, I must have at least one SPD, possibly two, and a couple of pads as well.

Does the gear hold up for you on the road?

Taku: Great. I carry two SPD-20s on stage and two backups, but I've never had any problems.

Bashiri: The roadworthiness of the Roland equipment is stellar.

Technology has certainly come a long way. It wasn't that long ago when the first crude electronic percussion instruments were considered cutting edge.

Richie: And it wasn't that long ago when guys had these refrigerator-size cases full of instruments. Now you can just take a HandSonic.

Bashiri: Ultimately, a percussionist wants to be able to execute the music he or she hears in their head, and technology is bringing us closer and closer to that goal. There will always be plenty of room for it to evolve, but having said that, I'm very happy with the technology I have at hand. If there's something I have to recreate for a live gig, I can do it with the SPD-S, the SPD-20, or the HandSonic. Roland gear has so many possibilities.

Taku: Roland has brought a lot of drum sounds to the forefront that people wouldn't have thought of using or even heard before, and that may form an interest in all these great new sounds and their heritage.

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